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ABSTRACT

Intended to foster playreading skills in high school students, this lesson plan can be used to teach the essential ingredients of a play in a single class period and can be used verbatim or adapted as desired. The plan includes a phase for motivating student interest in reading plays, a discussion of the skills needed for reading a script, and a description of the nine parts of a stage. The last assignment in the lesson plan is the actual reading of a play. (HOD)

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LESSON PLAN TAKES PUZZLE OUT OF PLAY READING

by

Robert Stewart

In my approximately 10 years of teaching theatre at an excellent New York City public high school, I always inquired by a show of hands how many students -- all with a dramatics background -- had been taught how to read a play. Few if any responded.

Why, you may wonder, this avid interest? Well, its genesis goes back to when I became aware I was deficient in playreading, and was in a quandary as to what to do about it, in my first undergraduate acting class. This deficiency came to light when I asked a student director at a scene rehearsal to describe the character that I was supposed to play. I very likely would not have learned how to read a script or have become an acting teacher had I not taken a playwriting course in my senior year.

This is the rationale of my concern. The lesson plan that follows takes approximately one period. It can be used verbatim, or it can be adapted as desired. In introducing a play unit in a speech-centered English class, for example, a favorite one-act play (and one that students thanked me for choosing, which is not customary) is "Where the Cross Is Made" by Eugene O'Neill. A bit more about that later.

The Lesson Plan

Motivation:

How many of you like to read plays? Raise your hand. Can you tell us why? (Elicit response from students; list on board.) How many don't like to read plays? Raise your hand. Tell us why. (Elicit; list on board.)

Transition:

For those who don't like reading plays, you might change your attitude if you knew the special techniques needed to enjoy this unique form of literature. Therefore, what do you think the aim of this lesson should be? (Elicit)

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Aim:

(Write on board) - How to Read a Play

Discussion:

Before we get to the techniques I mentioned, we need to know the following:

(Write on board)

Essential Ingredients of a Play

(Elicit the following from students with some encouragement.)

In a play people speak to each other. What do we call the words? (dialog) What are the people in a play called? (characters) Optional: What does Shakespeare call the characters in his plays? (dramatis personae) In using words, some kind of action develops among the characters. What is the name for this? (plot) Continue along these lines, using terms that are likely to be familiar to explain the language of the stage.

1. People (called characters)
2. Story (or plot)
3. Dialog (words the characters say)
4. Setting (the environment; the particular place, era, or time)
5. Theme (the main idea underlying the play). The teacher might add verbally, Othello, and if there is no response say, "jealousy."
6. Stage directions (all words other than dialog); here the teacher should develop these ideas with students: stage effects, entrances and exits, and costume descriptions.

If you had to define a script, what would you say it is? (Elicit)

(Write on board) A script is a story told in dialog form. How would you define a play? (Elicit)

(Write on board) A play is a story told by actors on a stage before an audience.¹

In practice the word play is used also to mean script.

NOW we're up to discussing the skills needed for reading a script.

(Write on board) script score

(Develop as requisite)

1. Who knows what score means apart from a ball game?
2. Here's a clue: think of music.
3. Think of a music conductor.
4. What does a conductor have before him when he conducts an orchestra? (Elicit -- if necessary supply the answer.) A score.
5. Who can tell us the relationship between a script and a score? (Elicit) Each is a creative work that exists on the written page.
6. Let us suppose next that you are a composer. You have written a piece of orchestral music you think is great, and you want the Boston Symphony or the New York Philharmonic or some other marvelous orchestra to play it. So you send the score to the conductor; let us say Zubin Mehta of the New York Philharmonic. We are going to assume that Mr. Mehta is going to sit down in a room and study your score. He will not get off the chair until he finishes doing this. What technique does Mr. Mehta use, so that he can tell whether he likes or doesn't like the music you wrote?

(If necessary, the teacher should explain that Mr. Mehta "hears" the music being played in his "mind's ear" by the New York Philharmonic.)

1. I am indebted to the late Professor Milton Smith of Columbia University for this definition.

7. What does that tell us about the way you should go about reading a script? (Elicit; write on board)
You need to "hear" the characters in your "mind's ear" and "see" them in your imagination as you read the script.

If you don't "hear" the voices of the characters as you're reading the play, the script is lifeless.

8. How many of you have read a script in the way we have discussed? (Elicit) Were you able to "see" and "hear" the characters in one reading? (Elicit)
9. The first time you might read to get an idea of the characters and plot. The second time you might try to visualize and listen to the characters. When this happens, you'll find you will have a very pleasant experience. It's like the conductor "hearing" the music of a score, with all of the instruments playing, as he looks through it.
10. Are there any questions about how to read a play? (Elicit)

Epilogue:

1. The late famous theatrical director, Harold Clurman, a very bright man, said he would read a script a number of times when he was asked to direct it. What do you think is the reason for it? (Elicit)
2. (If needed, something like the following can be added):
Let's suppose I am going to give each of you an assignment: to write in depth the biography of a living person of your choice. You will have all the time and cooperation necessary. How might you go about it? (Elicit) Spend a good deal of time with the person, learn all about the individual's habits, interests, strong points, weak points, etc.; interview the subject's close friends; talk to everyone who has known the person since childhood: teachers, fellow students, friends, neighbors, parents, relatives, etc.
3. Does that give you a clue as to why Mr. Clurman should go through a script numerous times? (Elicit)
4. What does that tell you as a serious playreader? (Elicit)

Explaining the Nine Parts of a Stage

The logical step after teaching students the art of reading a script is to give them practice. So you give them an assignment. At home as they start reading the initial stage directions of, let us say, "Where the Cross Is Made," they are befuddled. They are confused in part because they haven't been informed about the nine parts of a proscenium (or picture frame) stage. They don't know, for instance, where stage right or left is; upstage, downstage, etc. Consequently, they are at a loss to visualize O'Neill's uniquely superb mise-en-scene.

My approach in the second day's lesson is to first sketch in chalk over two blackboards the skeleton form of a proscenium stage. I then ask who knows where stage right is. If no one does, I explain that it is to the actors' right as they face the audience. A capital R, then capital L, are written in their respective places.

I next inquire who knows where downstage is, upstage, center, and I add that these terms may be written as down or downstage, etc. Chalk lines on the board are drawn horizontally within the form to indicate down, center, and up. Then two vertical lines are drawn intersecting the horizontal ones. The pupils are now viewing nine blank spaces representing as many areas. I point to each space, in random order, asking different volunteers to supply answers which are written in abbreviated form; e.g., UC, DR, etc. Other terminology, such as sight lines, offstage, and apron, can be explained also.

Is the class now ready to undertake a play reading assignment? Yes? No? Well, not quite. Why? One has to conceptualize the milieu, in reading a script, in which the action takes place. However, the school text doesn't contain a picture or drawing of the setting.

In this case the pupils can become functional set designers outside of class. They are instructed to take a sheet of notebook paper (or some other kind) and turn it sideways. On it will be sketched a diagram of a stage as was done in class. Assorted objects (called props) will be indicated, according to the stage directions, as follows. Here I draw simple figures on the board like a square, circle, rectangle, and indicate how each can designate a table, chair, bed, etc. Basic pointers regarding stage design are imparted. Everyone is to bring

in a drawing of the setting on the day assigned. Volunteers will then be asked to draw theirs on the board; they will be discussed.

Reading the Play

The reading of a play is now assigned. It is important to follow up on pupils' skills whether in homework questions or in those posed in class. A few general examples: 1. How does character X sound in your "mind's ear"? (Or, if you could hear Ms. Y speak, how would you describe her diction?) 2. How do you visualize the facial characteristics of character Z? Do you know anyone who looks like that in real life? Would someone like to draw a sketch of character Z's face and bring it in? 3. Describe the most dramatic (or interesting or humorous) scene as you saw it in your imagination. Why do you think it had this effect on you?